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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000175

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Close adviser to president downplays talk of elections and linkup with radical party

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 300241Z Jan 03

- (B) FBIS Reston Va DTG 291012Z Jan 03
- (C) Colombo 170, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador had a very interesting conversation on January 29 with Ronnie De Mel, a close adviser to President Kumaratunga and a senior MP in her People's Alliance (PA) party. De Mel downplayed recent reports that the president was angling for early parliamentary elections. Despite reports, he also did not think that a possible PA linkup with the radical JVP party had gone beyond unofficial discussions. De Mel is a sober, longtime Mission contact, and his comments indicate that in spite of all the smoke re various political machinations there is not much fire -- at least for the moment. END SUMMARY.

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Dinner with De Mel
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12. (SBU) The Ambassador had dinner at the residence of Ronnie De Mel on January 29. De Mel, 77, is a close adviser to the president and a senior MP in her PA party (his wife, Mallika, is also a PA MP). De Mel's residence, a fusion of Sri Lankan and "bungalow" design, was quite elegant. He also had a lovely -- and very pricey collection of about 20 colorful, abstract paintings by George Keyt, a well-known Sri Lankan artist.

13. (C) De Mel also has a colorful past, almost Churchillian in all of its twists-and-turns. He was originally a member of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), joining the party in the 1960s when it was headed by then-Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. After falling out with the irascible Bandaranaike, De Mel defected to the United National Party (UNP) in the 1970s. A close associate of President J.R. Jayewardene, he served as finance minister for the UNP government in the late 1970s and 1980s. He left the UNP government in the late 1980s as President Premadasa took the reigns of power. Premadasa was so angry with this that De Mel felt obliged to flee Sri Lanka and go into exile for several years. (Note: Discussing his break with Premadasa, De Mel told the Ambassador that he was sick and tired of him, particularly Premadasa's clear willingness to use violence against political opponents.) After Premadasa was killed in a bomb attack carried out by the Tigers in 1993, De Mel rejoined the UNP only to crossover to the PA in 1999. He served Kumaratunga's government as a senior minister until the PA lost the December 2001 election.

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Doubts that Elections are Nigh
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14. (C) Ambassador Wills asked De Mel about the recent flurry of press reports citing the president and the government as freely discussing the possibility of new parliamentary elections. (Note: Per Refs A-B, Kumaratunga was recently quoted as stating that she was unhappy with the government, and was ready to dissolve Parliament and call elections. In response, UNP Minister G.L. Peiris said the government was ready for elections if they were called.) De Mel said he seriously doubted that the president had any plans to call new elections soon. She had not briefed PA MPs on any plans of that sort. He noted that he thought that Kumaratunga was mercurial in temperament, so anything might happen, but he just did not think she was readying plans for elections at this point.

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Reports of PA-JVP Linkup
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15. (C) The Ambassador also asked about the consistent drip of reports that the president and her PA party may be considering some sort of alliance with the Sinhalese extremist Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party. (Note: Per Ref C, various, vague reports are circulating that the PA and JVP are discussing a linkup in what would be a reprise of the formal alliance they shared in late 2001.) De Mel again downplayed the reports. He remarked that any contacts that the PA has had with the JVP are "unofficial" and PA MPs as a group have not approved them. (Note: The PA has a party rule that MPs and other party officials must approve formal efforts to reach out to other parties.) In his estimation, there might be some in the PA that wanted such a link, but he did not see them getting their way at any time soon.

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Re the Peace Process
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16. (C) Queried about the status of the peace process, De Mel commented that he hoped that it would succeed and he generally supported the government's efforts. He said he had real doubts about the Tamil Tigers and their intentions, however. The Tigers have come part of the way, but they still have a very long way to go before they could be trusted and accepted by most Sri Lankans. It was not clear whether the Tigers were flexible enough to make the necessary changes, but he doubted they were.

17. (C) In a parenthetical comment, De Mel related that he doubted the government had any chance of receiving the two-thirds support in Parliament needed to approve the constitutional aspects of any final settlement with the LTTE. About 25 of the 80 or so PA MPs were "center right" and had been willing to consider working with the government, he noted. (Note: De Mel counted himself in this group.) The government had "botched" cooperation with this group, however, due to its poor handling of the proposed constitutional amendment curbing executive powers last year. (Note: In October 2002, the Supreme Court essentially threw out the government's proposal -- See Ref C.)

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On Iraq
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18. (C) In a brief colloquy re the Iraq situation, De Mel said he doubted that there would be too many anti-U.S. disturbances in Sri Lanka should there be a war. He advised, however, that if war did take place it would be wise for U.S. officials to avoid the east for awhile. (Note: Sri Lanka's Eastern Province has a large population of Muslims, including some extremists. See Ref C re the latest on Sri Lankan reaction to the Iraq situation.)

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COMMENT
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19. (C) De Mel is a sober, widely respected, and longtime Mission contact. (Note: Some of the material in our bio-file on him goes back to the early 1960s.) His comments indicate that in spite of all the smoke re various political machinations there is not much fire. That said, "cohabitation" relations remain strained and -- as De Mel noted -- Kumaratunga is mercurial. Given these unsteady variables, there remains the possibility that Sri Lanka could wake up one fine morning and find out that it is headed toward elections -- or that the PA has again aligned itself with the extremist JVP -- or both. END COMMENT.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS